

POSITION STATEMENT

Service-Learning: An Essential Component of Citizenship Education

A POSITION STATEMENT OF NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES

PREPARED BY THE NCSS CITIZENSHIP SELECT SUBCOMMITTEE

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RATIONALE

The mission of the social studies profession, since its inception, has been to develop informed and active citizens. To become responsible citizens, students must have access not only to content knowledge and core democratic values, but also to opportunities to learn citizenship skills and apply them to problems and needs in the community beyond the classroom. Service-learning provides essential opportunities for students not only to develop civic participation skills, values, and attitudes, but also to acquire first-hand knowledge of the topics they are studying in the curriculum. Service-learning provides an authentic means for using social studies content and skills to investigate social, political, and economic issues and to take direct action in an effort to create a more just and equitable society. Quality service-learning experiences may positively influence the following aspects of student development:

- Academic, problem solving, and critical thinking skills
- Ethical development and moral reasoning ability
- Social and civic responsibility
- Self-esteem, assertiveness, and empathy
- Political efficacy
- Tolerance and acceptance of diversity
- Career exploration

DEFINITION

Service-learning connects meaningful service in the school or community with academic learning and civic responsibility. Service-learning is distinguished from community service or volunteerism

in two ways. First, the service activity is integrated with academic skills and content. Second, students engage in structured reflection activities on their service experiences. Quality service-learning activities meet a number of important criteria. In particular, they should:

- Provide opportunities for student and community input in the design of the service-learning experience;
- Engage students in both meaningful service and essential social studies content;
- Provide opportunities for reflection on the service experience and the connections between this experience, democratic values, and citizenship;
- Focus on change rather than charity, enabling students to question prevailing norms and develop new ideas for creating a more just and equitable society.

Effective service-learning projects go beyond simply using the community as a learning laboratory for student development. Of equal importance is the attempt to solve community problems, meet human and environmental needs, and advocate for changes in policies and laws to promote the common good. Through addressing real-life problems in their communities, students are challenged to work together to exercise the rights and responsibilities of democratic citizenship.

BENEFITS FOR SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHING AND LEARNING

Service-learning provides multiple benefits for social studies students, teachers, and their communities. First, service-


learning activities provide relevant and motivational opportunities for students to connect the principles and processes of democratic life with practical community problem solving. Service-learning allows students to practice in the community the civic values and concepts they are learning in their social studies classrooms. With guided practice in collaborative problem solving, they learn that they can make a difference. In addition, the practical application of social science knowledge to community problems gives some students a much-needed stimulus to enhance their academic achievement.

Second, service-learning increases students' awareness of the community and world around them, the unmet needs in our society, the agencies and institutions involved in attempting to meet those needs, and a variety of strategies that they can use to create a better world. Through service-learning, students connect with real individuals and institutions working against injustice. They learn firsthand about the advantages of working as a group, the influence of public policy on human lives, and the intricacies of local government and community politics.

Finally, service-learning enhances the development of democratic values and attitudes. Not only do students develop firsthand knowledge of such abstract concepts as justice, diversity, opportunity, equality, and the common good, but they also develop empathy and compassion for others. Through direct experiences working with others in the community, students learn that American society is "unfinished," and that they can play a key role in narrowing the disparity between our democratic ideals and the reality of daily life.

CONCLUSION

National Council for the Social Studies believes that service-learning should be viewed as an essential component of social studies education in the 21st century. Service-learning greatly enhances the potential for social studies teachers to fulfill their mission of educating informed and active citizens who are committed to improving society through the democratic process. Students are

less likely to become such citizens in a text-bound social studies curriculum that does not give them opportunities to practice their democratic rights and responsibilities and to contribute to the common good. For these reasons, NCSS strongly supports the integration of quality service-learning activities into the K-12 social studies curriculum as well as all social studies teacher education programs. 

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